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ABSTRACT

As part of an effort to identify a group of successful professionals, determine what percentage attended small secondary schools, and assess from those attending small schools their attitudes regarding the quality of education received and aspects of the experience which they felt contributed to their professional success, all 100 members of the United States Senate were mailed a 29-item, self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire included 13 statements about principles/qualities of effective schooling arising from "effective schools research" to be graded by respondents on the basis of their own experience. Only 21 senators responded, 10 of whom indicated they had adopted a policy of not participating in surveys, questionnaires, or interviews with academic institutions. Of the 11 who did complete questionnaires, 5 had graduated from high schools with 40 or fewer students in their class, with 3 graduating from schools with 15 or fewer seniors. Although the response rate was too low to make any inferences, senators who attended small schools rated their experiences more positively than those attending large schools in all areas except parental involvement in the school and community support of the school. Interestingly, these are two areas referred to in the literature as strong points for small schools. (NEC)

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A SURVEY OF U.S. SENATORS REGARDING THEIR HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION

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A SURVEY OF U.S. SENATORS

REGARDING THEIR HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION

More than a score of major studies of national scope in education have appeared since 1983. The most publicized, A Nation at Risk raised serious questions about the quality of education provided students in America and proposed recommendations to improve the status of education. During the same time, research findings have suggested that some schools are more effective than others (Goodlad, 1983). Among these findings is that small schools, offering diversity and choice, may be one of the most important strategies for educational improvement (Dollar, 1984).

Of the various "reform" efforts in education in the last 50 years, perhaps the most successful has been the consolidation of rural and small school districts. From 1932 to 1980 the number of school districts in this country decreased from 127,649 to 15,601 (Tamblyn, 1973, Williams, 1981). The assumption has been held by many--both in and out of education--that small schools are inherently inferior to larger schools. Yet many of our citizenry attended small schools prior to the emphasis placed on consolidation during the 1940's through 1960's. It would be interesting, perhaps astounding, to identify the number of successful professionals in business, education, science, etc. who received their public education in a small school.

The purpose of this study was to (1) identify a group of successful professionals, (2) survey their members to determine what percentage attended a small school, and (3) assess from those who attended a small school their attitudes regarding the quality of education they received at the school and aspects of the experience which they felt attributed

to their professional success.

Members of the United States Senate were selected as the target group of successful professionals to survey for this study. Our objective was to survey elected members of the U.S. Senate and inquire about the approximate size of the high school each attended. In addition to school size, we asked about senators' participation in extra curricular activities and their perception of the quality of education they received. It was our hypothesis that many members of the Senate attended small or rural secondary schools and we wanted to test this hypothesis through objective inquiry. If we were to find that a significant number of senators did attend small schools and perceived overall positive learning experiences from such attendance, the findings would infer that small schools are not inherently inferior to larger schools. Also, that students who attend small schools are not necessarily handicapped in their pursuit of career success.

Methodology

A 29-item, self-administered questionnaire was designed for data collection (See Appendix). In mid-June of 1985, questionnaires were mailed to each senator at their Washington, D.C. address. One month later, a second mailing of the questionnaire was sent to senators that had not yet responded. With each mailing, a brief cover letter was enclosed explaining the purpose of the study and requesting participation from the respective senator.

Of the nation's 100 senators, only 21 responded to this study. Furthermore, 10 of these sent letters indicating that they had adopted a policy of not participating in surveys, questionnaires, or interviews

with academic institutions. Hence, only 11 senators returned completed questionnaires.

Findings

The response rate from U.S. Senators was disappointingly low. Of the 11 who did complete questionnaires, five graduated from high schools with as few as 40 or fewer students in their graduating class. In fact, three respondents graduated from high schools with 15 or fewer seniors.

On the questionnaire, senators were presented 13 statements about high school education and, on the basis of their own experience, asked to "grade" the quality of high school education they received. Grades were to be assigned on the scale, "A" = excellent, "B" = above average, "C" = average, "D" = below average, and "F" = failure. The statements selected for "grading" were principles or qualities of effective schooling arising from the literature on "effective schools research." For purposes of comparison, the responses of the five senators who graduated from small schools (graduating classes of 40 students or less) were listed next to the remaining six senators whose graduating class size ranged from 150 to 1000. A grade point value was calculated for each statement on the basis of "A" = 4 points, "B" = 3 points, "C" = 2 points, "D" = 1 point, and "F" = 0 points. (See Table 1).

Conclusions

The most significant aspect learned from this study was that the majority of U.S. Seantors do not respond to educational polls or surveys.

Although the response rate is too low to make any inferences whatsoever, it is interesting to note that the senators who attended small high schools

rated their experience more positively than those who attended large schools in all areas except in parental involvement in the school and community support of the school (See Table 1). Interestingly, these are two areas referred to in the literature as strong points for small schools.

In this study we were unable to either prove or disprove the hypothesis that many members of the U.S. Senate attended small high schools, and perceived overall positive benefits from their attendance. Yet, this study may still have value. Other groups of successful professionals (eg. state legislators, governors, college presidents, state supreme court justices, state superintendents of public instruction, etc.) could be targeted and surveyed to test the same hypothesis we attempted here. With another group, the response rate may be sufficiently large as to make some validated statements about the benefits, or drawbacks, of small school attendance.

TABLE 1

ATTITUDES OF U.S. SENATORS REGARDING ASPECTS OF THE EDUCATION THEY RECEIVED DURING THEIR HIGH SCHOOL TRAINING BASED ON A GRADE POINT SCALE WHERE "A" = 4, "B" = 3, "C" = 2, "D" = 1, AND "F" = 0.

STATEMENT	Senators attending small high schools N	Senators attending small high schools GPA	Senators attending large high schools N	Senators attending large high schools GPA
1. Student misbehavior was not tolerated. The school climate was orderly, serious, and safe.	5	3.8	6	3.2
2. Most of my teachers had a thorough knowledge of their subject, liked young people, and were effective instructors.	5	3.4	6	3.2
3. My teachers placed high expectations on my performance in school and motivated me toward high academic achievement.	5	3.8	6	3.2
4. Homework was a useful part of my high school experience.	5	3.2	6	2.7
5. Overall, student time in school was devoted to learning tasks--not wasted or spent doing "busy work."	5	3.2	6	2.8
6. I remember my high school principal as one who regularly observed teachers and students in the classroom, and who placed strong emphasis on good teaching.	5	3.3	6	2.8
7. Many parents in my high school were actively involved in the school and supported their children in school activities.	5	2.8	6	3.2
8. My teachers spent a considerable amount of time providing either individualized or small group instruction.	5	3.2	6	2.8
9. Most students were made to feel successful in my high school.	5	3.3	6	3.2
10. My performance as a student was closely monitored and I received regular feedback either in the form of grades or a written evaluation.	5	3.8	6	3.0
11. Overall, the townspeople in my high school community attended and supported school sponsored activities.	5	2.8	6	3.2
12. All students were treated fairly and as individuals of worth in my high school.	5	3.6	6	3.0
13. I received a good high school education.	5	3.8	6	3.3

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APPENDIX

On the following two pages is a copy of the questionnaire used in this study.

SENATE EDUCATION STUDY

The purpose of this survey is to gather information about the educational background of members of the United States Senate. Please CIRCLE the appropriate answer or WRITE IN the answer(s).

General Information

1. Name (for follow-up purposes only): _____
2. Profession before election to Senate: _____
3. Father's profession: _____

Section I -- Educational Background

1. What year did you graduate from high school? _____
2. In what state were you living when you graduated from high school? _____
3. Did you graduate from a public or a private high school?
   Public _____ Private _____
4. ESTIMATE the APPROXIMATE number of students in your high school graduating class: _____ students
5. ESTIMATE the APPROXIMATE number of students in the entire high school studentbody of the school from which you graduated: _____ students
6. ESTIMATE the APPROXIMATE population of the town in which your high school was located: _____ people
7. Where did you spend most of your time as a child growing up?
   a) farm or rural area
   b) small town or community
   c) suburban area
   c) large city
   d) other: _____
8. CIRCLE each of the extracurricular activities listed below in which you participated during your high school years.
   -varsity sports -cheerleading -pep club
   -drama/theater -debate -student government
   -band/orchestra -choir/glee club -service clubs or organizations
   -other: _____
9. Identify the one or two academic classes you remember as the most enjoyable/meaningful during your high school years:
   #1 _____ #2 _____
10. Did you attend a one-room (one-teacher) elementary or secondary school at anytime during your early education? Yes _____ No _____
11. Did you graduate from among the top 10% of your high school graduating class? Yes _____ No _____ Don't know _____
12. CIRCLE the extent of your college training:
    a) did not graduate from college
    b) bachelor's degree
    c) master's degree
    d) law degree
    e) doctorate degree
    f) other: _____
13. From your own experience or point of view, what is the best sized high school (number of students) you would want your children/grandchildren to attend? _____ students (If you feel enrollment size makes no difference, write "doesn't matter.")

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Section II -- Attitudes About High School

Listed below are several statements intended to assess the quality of your high school education. Even though it has been several years since you graduated, please respond from your best recollection. "Grade" each of the following statements on the scale: "A" = excellent; "B" = above average; "C" = average; "D" = below average; and "F" = failure. Each item should be "graded" independently.

Statement	Grade				
1. Student misbehavior was not tolerated. The school climate was orderly, serious, and safe.	A	B	C	D	F
2. Most of my teachers had a thorough knowledge of their subject, liked young people, and were effective instructors.	A	B	C	D	F
3. My teachers placed high expectations on my performance in school and motivated me toward high academic achievement.	A	B	C	D	F
4. Homework was a useful part of my high school experience.	A	B	C	D	F
5. Overall, student time in school was devoted to learning tasks -- not wasted or spent doing "busy work."	A	B	C	D	F
6. I remember my high school principal as one who regularly observed teachers and students in the classroom, and who placed strong emphasis on good teaching.	A	B	C	D	F
7. Many parents in my high school were actively involved in the school and supported their children in school activities.	A	B	C	D	F
8. My teachers spent a considerable amount of time providing either individualized or small group instruction.	A	B	C	D	F
9. Most students were made to feel successful in my high school.	A	B	C	D	F
10. My performance as a student was closely monitored and I received regular feedback either in the form of grades or a written evaluation.	A	B	C	D	F
11. Overall, the townspeople in my high school community attended and supported school sponsored activities.	A	B	C	D	F
12. All students were treated fairly and as individuals of worth in my high school.	A	B	C	D	F
13. I received a good high school education.	A	B	C	D	F

THANK YOU for your participation. Please insert your completed questionnaire in the pre-paid mailer and return to the researchers.

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